

The Vikings

The people who lived in Scandinavia around 800-1100 before Christ have come to be known as the Vikings, and the time period is known as the Viking age.

The Vikings were mainly farmers, but they were also very skilled hunters and fishermen. They were also skilled craftsmen who could create their own weapons and tools. With the help of their ships they were able to travel far and trade with other people. Unfortunately there were also Vikings who were robbers and pirates. They travelled around and looted. The life of a Viking was not very long. They often died at quite a young age because of diseases or in battle. During the Viking era there were no doctors or medicines. They captured people during their looting trips and used them as their slaves. The owners could treat the slaves any way he wanted to. It was very unusual that a slave was freed.

We know a lot about the Viking age today because archaeologists have dug up graves and old living areas from this time.

A town called Birka was founded in Sweden, which was used as a trading port for the Vikings. The city was built on an island called Björkö on the lake Mälaren.

There were plenty of chiefs and petty kings during this time that had gained power over small areas of land through conquests.

The Vikings never wrote on paper. Instead they carved signs on stone and wood. Their script was called runes. One row of runes consisted of 16 characters. Today we call this *Futhark* after the first seven letters.



Futhark.

Most commonly the runes were carved on stones, which were later erected. The most common rune-stones were a type of gravestone, which was erected in the memory of someone or to show that you were rich and powerful. The rune-stones were often decorated, painted in black, red, blue or white. You can find rune-stones in many places in Sweden. Rökstenen is the most famous stone.

The Vikings built their houses with things they could find around their area, for example wood or peat. Every beam in the frame was made with the trunk of a tree and was sculpted using simple tools. The labour was hard and time-consuming. The walls were plaited using formable branches. Reed, straw or grass peat was used to create the roof. Almost all houses had a hole in the roof where the smoke from the fireplace could escape.

In battle the Vikings often used the element of surprise. They started by shooting a large amount of darts at their enemy. After this they threw their spears at them and later turned to violent man-to-man fights. The most brave and violent men stood at the very front. To protect their bodies against darts and stabs they used chain armour. This was made out of small iron rings, which were put together by hand. However, only the wealthy men could afford to wear these. The chain armour was passed on from father to son and was taken into possession when someone died in battle.



Röksten

Old Gods of Asa

The Vikings worshiped a type of god called Asa. These gods were like humans in many ways. They would argue, fight and do wrong, They could even get killed.

The earth was called Midgård and this is where the people lived. The Gods lived in Asgård and the giants, who were the gods enemies lived in Utgård.

Oden, with his two ravens – Hugin and Munin – was the god who was considered to be the most powerful. His home was called Valhall. If a Viking died in battle he would go to Valhall. In Valhall you fought all day and partied at night. Every night there was a great feast where they slaughtered and ate the pig Särimer. Särimer was resurrected every morning, and was slaughtered again every night. Odens horse, Sleipner, was very fast. It had eight legs.

Tor was one of the other gods. He had the power over the thunder, the weather and the harvest. There was a rumbling sound when he drove around in his carriage and there were lightning bolts when he hit the giants with his hammer. Many of the Vikings wore his war hammer "Mjölner" as a necklace.

There were also other gods of Asa.

The Vikings sacrificed to make the gods more friendly.



The Gods of Asa were all very powerful and every god was the protector of a certain area. The Vikings thought that cosmos was held together by a giant tree, the oak Yggdrasil (which means horror-horse).

All the different branches of the tree carried different worlds; Asgård - the home of the gods, Midgård – the home of the people, Hel – the underworld, and Utgård – home of the rugged.

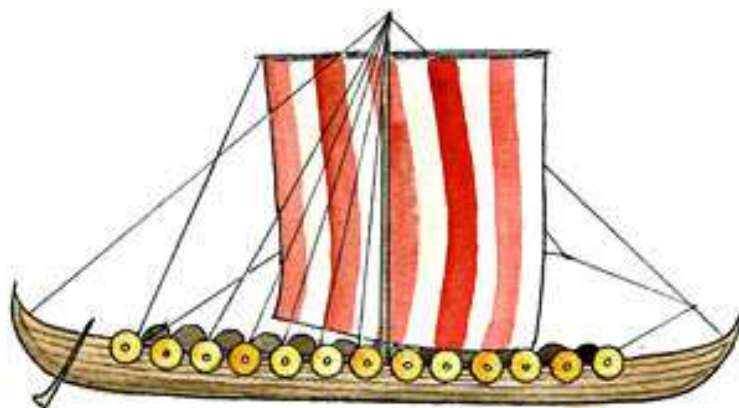
The Ships

If you look at the ships used during the Viking era, you will be surprised that the Vikings were able to travel as much as they did. Their ships seem both smaller and more brittle than our ships today. However, the Vikings were very talented seamen and craftsmen.

The long boat was one of the most common ships. It had a mast and oars. They needed 24 to 50 men to row the boats and it was believed that the Vikings sat on chests in the boats and also kept their personal belongings in these. To steer the ships they used one steering-oar. They only used one big sail and they were able to dismantle the mast to be able to sneak unnoticed onto the coasts.

The sails were often striped and made out of wool. They were striped because the chiefs asked weavers in the area to weave a couple of meters of fabric. The colour of the fabric varied depending on the different types of sheep and what pastures they had been on.

The long boats were often used for looting because they could carry many warriors. To be able to survive long journeys across the ocean they had to be able to bring along a lot of food and water. Sometimes they even brought along pets, horses, dogs and sheep. The food was prepared on deck in a sandbox so that the fire wouldn't spread.



A Scandinavian long boat. If it had had the head of an animal in the bow it would have been called a dragon ship.

The ships were often decorated with dragon or animal heads in the bow. These ships are called dragon boats.



*An animal head made out of wood,
found at a Norwegian grave.*

The Vikings hung their shields on the outside of the railing on the ships. These worked both as protection and decoration.

One of the longest viking ships was 55 meters and could carry a load of over 30 tons, which is about the same weight as 30 cars.

The Vikings used different types of ships depending on what they were going to use them for. If they were going to carry a lot of cargo the ship needed to be wide – **a merchant ship**. If they wanted to surprise their enemy and move quickly through the water the ship needed to be narrow and fast – **a warship**.

The ships were built with oak and pine. The keel was built out of oak because it is a strong material. The sides of the ship were made out of pine because it is a light material. Skeppen var byggda av ek och fur. The boats were sealed with tufts of fur dipped in tar. The tufts were tucked between the gaps of the wooden planks.

The Vikings loved to give their ships powerful names. One of the most famous ships was called "Ormen Långe (Long Snake)", and belonged to King Olav Trygvesson of Norway. "Ormen Långe" was 37 meters long.

The Vikings navigated by using the sun and the stars. They also learned to recognize different winds, how the sea behaved in various places and different types of sea birds. For every trip they made they became more skilled at navigating.



How the Vikings lived

On the estates where the people lived there were many different types of houses. The people lived in longhouses and there was also a smithy, barn, bakery and a place where the slaves lived. If they could not afford a barn the animals had to live in the longhouse with the people during the winter.

A longhouse could be up to 30 meters long. It was built like one giant room without any windows. It only had small openings to supply the fire with oxygen. Due to this the houses were very dark. The houses had benches along the walls, which were used as beds at night. If they were very rich they could have proper beds. During the later parts of the Viking era they built longhouses with different rooms, for example kitchen and bedrooms. The houses could also have windows, but without glass.

The most common animals were horses and longhorn cattle. The horses were used for transport and to pull carts. Quite early on the Vikings started having dogs as pets. These were used for hunting and as a companion during war. They were also good at guarding the estates.

The Norwegian Vikings moved to Iceland. They chased away the Irish monks who lived there at the time. They brought horses with them who came to be the first Iceland ponies. You are not allowed to import or export horses to or from Iceland in order to protect the Iceland pony breed.



The houses in Iceland were well embedded in hills. Iceland did not have a lot of forest and the houses were therefore built out of any material they could find. By using the hills to build their houses they took advantage of the ground heat and were well protected. The houses were often also built out of peat blocks.



Clothes

The clothes were made out of wool, flax and had strong colours. The shirts were often decorated with weaved or plaited ribbons and if they wanted to make a coat look extra fancy they garnished it with fur. Naturally the more well off Vikings were better dressed than the simple farmers.

As the Vikings came into contact with different cultures, they were inspired by their dress sense. For example, baggy pants and boots from Arabia and Russia became very popular.

The woman's dress consisted of a chemise made out of linen and carried close to the body. On top of this she wore a skirt with suspenders. The suspenders were often fastened with a bejewelled buckle. The women also wore a coat or a simple shirt. The women always wore different types of jewellery such as neck-rings or necklaces. This was almost like a uniform for them.

The men wore different long trousers. On the upper body they wore sturdy shirts called "kolts". This was held together by a belt.

The shoes were made out of leather.

When the weather was cold the Vikings liked to wear different types of leather hats.